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The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

FOR some time I have been looking for a bit of fiction from which to cull passages illustrating certain fundamental principles of the story-teller's art. I seem finally to have found just what I sought in "The Young Visitors," a book published by the George H. Doran Company and purporting to be the work of a nine-year-old girl. Most readers of *The Student-Writer* doubtless are familiar by this time with this entertaining tale by Daisy Ashford.

The book is interesting, not merely as a precocious attempt by a child, but actually as a story. The technique—by which is meant the story-telling methods that hold the reader's interest—is almost perfect, in spite of the fact that the author, if her publishers' assertions are correct, never studied technique. She has told her story in a natural way. Wholly artless, the work achieves the effect of highest art. For, at bottom, good fictional technique is merely the art of telling a story in the natural way. Most of us strain for effects and thereby miss them.

J. M. Barrie, in his Preface, remarks: "The novelist will find the tale a model for his future work. How incomparably, for instance, the authoress dives into her story at once. How cunningly throughout she keeps us on the hooks of suspense."

With all of which most readers will concur. But the branch of story-telling in which the young author particularly excels is the difficult art of painting clear pictures in a few words—of keeping up the action while incidentally inserting clauses which vividly describe the persons or places.

This is the surprising feature of the production. Most amateurs, and some otherwise finished writers, go to one or other extreme. Either they give a bare outline of the action, with no illuminating touches to make the reader *see* the happenings, or they devote extended passages to character drawing and description, hopelessly clogging the action and making the story dull reading, for all its attempt at creating atmosphere.

Miss Ashford does neither. One paragraph serves to describe

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concisely the two leading characters, and then she is ready to launch into the action of her story. Note the smoothness of the transition:

Mr Salteena was an elderly man of 42 and was fond of asking people to stay with him. He had quite a young girl staying with him of 17 named Ethel Monticue. Mr Salteena had dark short hair and mustache and whiskers which were very black and twisty. He was middle sized and he had very pale blue eyes. He had a pale brown suit but on Sundays he had a black one and he had a topper every day as he thortght it more becoming. Ethel Monticue had fair hair done on the top and blue eyes. She had a blue velvit frock which had grown rather short in the sleeves. She had a black straw hat and kid gloves.

One morning Mr Salteena came down to brekfast and found Ethel had come down first which was strange. Is the tea made Ethel he said rubbing his hands. Yes said Ethel and such a quear shaped parcel has come for you.

Could we ask for a more straightforward way to begin a story? The character descriptions, no matter how amusing to adult ears, are vivid and productive of interest, and so concise that we are not given a chance to become bored in reading them. They amount, as it were, merely to brief introductions by the author, and no sooner is the formality over than she allows the persons themselves to take the floor and display their characteristics.

She might have extended her description of Ethel by saying that the girl was a late sleeper and usually tardy for breakfast, instead of which she artlessly—and at the same time artfully—suggests that fact in the course of the action.

Interest is aroused almost at once by mention of the "quear shaped parcel." It is found to contain the present of a top hat and a letter inviting Mr. Salteena "to come for a stop" with one Bernard Clark. The author could have introduced the letter earlier in the narration, but she was clever enough to arouse the reader's curiosity in it before doing so. The commonplace matter of receiving and accepting an invitation for a visit is made entertaining in the first chapter simply by the author's narration.

Note the picture with which the second chapter commences.

When the great morning came Mr Salteena did not have an egg for his brekfast in case he should be sick on the jorney.

What top hat will you wear asked Ethel.

I shall wear my best black and my white alpacka coat to keep off the dust and flies replied Mr. Salteena.

I shall put some red ruge on my face said Ethel because I am very pale owing to the drains in this house.

You will look very silly said Mr. Salteena with a dry laugh.

Could anything be more vivid than this simple dialogue, in spite of its lack of detailed descriptions or explanations? But Mr. Salteena's farewell to the housemaid is equally refreshing.

Mr S. skipped upstairs to Rosalind's room. Good-bye Rosalind he said I shall be back soon and I hope I shall enjoy myself.

I make no doubt of that sir said Rosalind with a blush as Mr Salteena silently put 2/6 on the dirty toilet cover.

Take care of your bronchitis said Mr S. rather bashfully and he hastily left the room waving his hand carelessly to the housemaid.

Come along cried Ethel powdering her nose in the hall let us get into the cab.

Only an artist could have mentioned so casually the "dirty toilet cover" which characterizes the whole room.

A letter from a student which lies before me on my desk inquires: "What is the best method of introducing descriptions of persons and places? I am always afraid of overdoing my descriptions, yet unless I go into careful detail, I fear the reader will not get the picture I want to convey."

An answer may be found in the last of the above quotations. The dirty toilet cover serves as a clew by which a picture of the whole room is flashed into our minds. The glimpse of Ethel hastily powdering her nose in the hall suggests the whole atmosphere of the bustling departure. I am not sure that I know the secret back of the unerring selection of these details. Apparently it consists in mentioning one—and as a rule only one—outstanding feature. Instinct must be the guide to the selection of this one feature.

But in any event—and here we come to an important phase of the matter—the author could not have instinctively selected the one essential detail, had not the whole scene existed vividly in her own mind. It is one thing to "make up" a description, but quite another thing to have the picture clearly before the eye and merely to exercise the power of choice in the mention of details. The latter, undoubtedly, is what Miss Ashford has done.

The account of the journey by train is masterly in its suggestiveness. It is brought vividly before us by means of one casual feature. Here we have it:

Mr Salteena got very excited in the train about his visit. Ethel was calm but she felt excited inside. Bernard has a big house said Mr S. gazing at Ethel he is inclined to be rich.

Oh indeed said Ethel looking at some cows flashing past the window. Mr. S. felt rather disheartened so he read the paper till the train stopped and the porters shouted Rickamere station.

With the picture of the cows flashing by we almost feel that we have been with the two on their journey. Had the author added another phrase about the landscape the picture would have been blurred instead of clear-cut and vivid.

But it is in casually describing scenes and characters that 9-year-old Daisy Ashford has a lesson for older fiction writers. Look at some examples:

We had better collect our traps said Mr Salteena and just then a very exalted footman in a cocked hat and olive green uniform put his head in at the window. Are you for Rickamere Hall he said in impressive tones.

Again:

Will he bring our luggage asked Ethel nervously.
I expect so said Mr Salteena lighting a very long cigar.

The lighting of the cigar conveys a complete impression of his manner and describes the act in full, by suggestion; yet most of us would have felt it necessary to inform the reader first that Mr. Salteena took it from his pocket. And note that even the cigar is given individual characterization.

Again:

Not at all sir said the footman and touching his cocked hat he jumped actively to the box.

A scenic description incidental to the action:

Just then the carriage rolled into a beautiful drive with tall trees and big red flowers growing amid shiny dark leaves. Presently the haughty coachman pulled up with a great clatter at a huge front door with tall pillars each side a big iron bell and two very clean scrapers.

Back to the personal:

The doors flung open as if by magic causing Ethel to jump and a portly butler appeared on the scene with a very shiny shirt front and a huge pale face.

The hero of the story is introduced and makes his first remark all in the same breath, without loss of anything important that could have been brought out in pages of personal description:

A tall man of 29 rose from the sofa. He was rather bent in the middle with very nice long legs fairish hair and blue eyes. Hullo Alf old boy he cried so you have got here all safe and no limbs broken.

Students who find it difficult to handle conversation in such a manner that the accompanying gestures, tones of voice and other details of characterization are fully brought out, without interrupting the dialogue, will find material for study in the methods of this youthful narrator:

Well said Mr Salteena lapping up his turtle soup you have a very sumptuous house Bernard.

His friend gave a weary smile and swallowed a few drops of sherry wine. It is fairly decent he replied with a bashful glance at Ethel after our repast I will show you over the premises.

Many thanks said Mr Salteena getting rather flustered with his forks.

Again:

Then Bernard said shall I show you over my domain and they strolled into the gloomy hall.

I see you have a lot of ancestors said Mr Salteena in a jejune tone, who are they.

Well said Bernard they are all quite correct. This is my aunt Caroline she was rather excentric and quite old.

So I see said Mr Salteena and he passed on to a lady with a very tight waist and quearly shaped. This is Mary Ann Fudge my grandmother I think said Bernard she was very well known in her day.

Why asked Ethel who was rather curious by nature.

Well I don't quite know said Bernard but she was and he moved away to the next picture. It was of a man with a fat smiley face and a red ribbon round him and a lot of medals. My great uncle Ambrose Fudge said Bernard carelessly.

It is impossible to overlook such image-arousing gems as these:

Mr. Salteena gazed round and beheld in the gloom a very superior gentleman in full evening dress who was reading a newspaper and warming his hands on the hot water pipes.

* * *

Over the mantelpiece was hung the painting of a lady in a low neck looking quite the thing.

* * *

When Mr. Salteena was dressed in his best blue suit and clean shirt he strolled into the sitting room where a gay canary was singing fit to burst in the window and a couple of doves cooing in a whicker cage.

* * *

The earl twiddled his mustache and slapped his leg with his white glove as calmly as could be. Mr Salteena purspired rather hard and gave a hitch to his garters to make sure. Then the portles divided and their names were shouted in chorus by countless domesticks.

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How is this for an easy transition from "outside" to "inside"?

Then they pealed on the bell and the door flew open. Sounds of laughter and comic songs issued from the abode and in a second they were in the crowded drawing room. It was packed with all the Elite and a stout duchess with a good natured face was singing a lively song and causing much merriment.

Experienced writers have confessed that they found the greatest difficulty in getting their characters through a door, or from one scene to another, or perhaps in carrying the story over a lapse of time. Transitions have no terrors for Daisy Ashford, who employs the most direct and simple methods with easy grace. Further examples:

Bernard heaved a sigh and his eyes flashed as he beheld her and Ethel thortght to herself what a fine type of manhood he represented.....Off they started the envy of all the waiters. They arrived at Windsor very hot from the jorney and Bernard at once hired a boat to row his beloved up the river.

Then the wedding march pealed fourth and down the church stepped Ethel and Bernard as husband and wife. Into the cab they got and speededly dashed off to the Gaierty. The wedding refreshments were indeed a treat to all.

Ethel went up to change her wedding garment for a choice pink velvit dress with a golden gurdle and a very chick toque. Bernard also put on a new suit of blue stripe and some silk socks and clean under clothing. Hurah hurah shouted the guests as the pair reappeared in the aforesaid get ups. Then everybody

Statement of the Ownership, Management, Circulation, etc., Required by the Act of Congress of Aug. 24, 1912.

of THE STUDENT-WRITER, published monthly, at Denver, Colo., for Oct., 1919.

Before me, a notary in and for the state and county aforesaid, personally appeared Willard E. Hawkins, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of The Student-Writer, Denver, Colo., and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management and circulation, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor and manager are: Publisher, Willard E. Hawkins, 1835 Champa street, Denver, Colo.; Editor, Willard E. Hawkins, 1835 Champa street, Denver, Colo.; Managing Editor, none; Manager, none.

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WILLARD E. HAWKINS, Editor
Sworn to and subscribed before me the 1st day of October, 1919.

WM. SANDERSON.
My commission expires Oct. 13, 1919.

got a bag of rice and sprinkled on the pair and Mr Salteena sadly threw a white tennis shoe at them wiping his eyes the while. Off drove the happy pair and the guests finished up the food. The happy pair went to Egypt for there Honymoon as they thought it would be a nice warm spot and they had never seen the wondrous land.

Seriously, these are good transitions. They keep the story on the move, getting the characters from one place to another, or over a lapse of time, without awkwardness or delay, and with a minimum of details. The secret of a good transition is in carrying the reader over the break so deftly that it is scarcely apparent.

The lesson to be gleaned from the book as a whole is the charm that lies in simple directness of narration. If we visualize our scenes clearly and employ simple words to convey the mental images from our own minds to those of the reader, we have mastered the great secret of story-telling. The only additional factor required is a worth-while story basis.

The Daisy Ashford story possesses action. This does not mean that there is anything wildly exciting in the things the characters do. There are no fights, no races, no hairbreadth escapes. It means that the things the characters do, whether rapidly or otherwise, are sketched in concisely for the reader's benefit, and that there is direct progression from one incident to the next. Nowhere is the story allowed to drag. Extended descriptions, as has been shown, are conspicuous by their absence. The characters are portrayed by what they say and do and by little side comments here and there which reveal their idiosyncrasies. A dialogue is continued only as long as it seems interesting, and as a rule is employed as a means of carrying the story forward—that is, for changing the relations of the characters to one another.

To sum up with a phrase borrowed from the modern efficiency expert, there is "no lost motion." And sustained motion is the acme of good story-telling.

W. E. H.

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Announcement of Change in Rate Schedule Effective January 1, 1920

AFTER January 1, 1920, an increased schedule will be substituted for the rates previously charged for Student-Writer literary service. The advance in rates is necessitated by two considerations: (1) the growing volume of business and consequent heavy demands upon the time and energy of the editor; (2) the increased cost of printing, supplies, office help, and everything involved in carrying on the workshop. It is our desire to feel in a position to devote more time and attention to individual manuscripts submitted for our services, and thus to make the assistance even more thorough, constructive and helpful than heretofore.

Those who wish to take advantage of the present rates may do so up to January 1 by purchasing credit slips for service, or making a deposit in such sum as they desire. These will be honored at any time during 1920 for service under the present rate schedule.

The rates in force beginning January 1, 1920, will be as follows:

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